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# National Museum Act Program (1973-1974): Speech 06

Albert T. Klyberg

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## THE RHODE ISLAND HISTORICAL SOCIETY

AT JOHN BROWN HOUSE, BUILT IN 1786



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Prepared remarks by  
Albert T. Klyberg, Director  
The Rhode Island Historical Society  
on S.796, 'Museum Services Act'  
July 18, 1973

Mr. Chairman, distinguished members of the Committee:

I am very grateful for the opportunity to appear before you to offer, briefly, some comments and observations concerning the 'Museum Services Act' under consideration. Since my only competent vantage point is the experience of my own agency, The Rhode Island Historical Society, I shall ask your indulgence as I sketch out our museum needs and how I believe this act would go a long way towards meeting them. I would suggest that while my comments will, indeed, be limited to our experience and perhaps, even for our State, deal with microscopic figures, I honestly believe they are also somewhat microcosmic and will represent many small museums across the country.

The Rhode Island Historical Society is one of the oldest historical societies in the United States. Chartered in 1822 it has just finished celebrating its hundred and fiftieth anniversary. From the first it set out to collect, preserve and interpret any and all objects which reflected the history of our State. At present the Society has three major areas of activity: an historical research library, a publication program, and a museum. It also has a special relationship with two State Commissions. It is the official contractor with the State of Rhode Island for the State Preservation Commission which administers the National Register and Grant programs of the National Park Service; and the Society is the chief prop and supplier of props for the Rhode Island Bicentennial Commission.

Our operating budget for 1973-1974 is \$190,000. In addition to this amount the Society will administer a \$15,000 matching grant from the National Endowment for the Arts, or \$30,000 to publish a catalog of our painting collection; a \$25,000 matching grant from the National Parks Service or \$50,000 to repair the exterior of our restored house-museum, John Brown House, a registered national landmark; and administer a \$22,000 grant from the National Historical Publications Commission or \$44,000 to prepare for publication Volume 1 of the Papers of Revolutionary War General, Nathanael Greene. Or, in other words, we shall have a budget of \$190,000 for operating expenses and another \$125,000 in grants and special projects.

The sources of income for our operating budget come from appropriations from the State of Rhode Island and City of Providence, annual members' dues, income from an endowment of approximately a million dollars, and an annual fund-drive conducted by the members to raise the balance.

Before the institution of the latter device we had experienced successive deficits of \$17,000, \$25,000 and \$35,000, which our endowment was called upon to fund. In addition we had called upon the endowment to fund the installation of fire and burglary detection systems in both our museum house and library buildings and for major restoration of our 1786 museum house. Unfortunately for us the work was accomplished just a few years before the museum programs of the National Endowments came into being.

The point of these revelations is that in spite of all our efforts and successes there are still areas of fundamental funding needs, particularly with regard to our museum program. We have pressed our state and local public sources and received a small increase in our State appropriation, we have pushed our endowment as far as we dare, we are going to our nearly 3,000 members twice a year for support and we have not been lazy in taking advantage of various federal programs. We have been diligent petitioners among the foundations and philanthropic individuals of our small state to provide the necessary matching amounts.

Yet, while we shall be able to interpret our museum collections adequately to those who come to visit us, we shall have no capability to take our collections to the community. Without professional staff our school visitation program is dependent totally upon volunteer interpreters. Instead of being able to offer our program to all thirty-nine cities and town we shall be limited largely to the Providence Area.

Similarly, to oversee the care of our nationally famous collection of Rhode Island colonial furniture and decorative arts we shall be able to afford only a part-time curator and whatever time I can spare from administrative and fund-raising duties.

We are concerned about the safety of our collections. While we have recently installed security systems, they could be enhanced. As part of the exterior restoration of our building we hope to filter out the harmful effects of ultra-violet light on our fabrics and prints and to seal out a great deal of air pollution through the installation of new storm windows with treated glass. The interior atmosphere of our period rooms and galleries will have to await air conditioning and humidity control. In the not too distant future we shall have to replace our main gas-fired heater. It was the first of its kind on College Hill in Providence; I am told that the gas mains were installed up our street just for its operation. Although the Gas Company annually assures us of its durability, it's not really the kind of antique we prize for our collection. And while the heating tunnels from Brown University end only a few hundred feet from our property, neither institution has funds at this time to pay for the construction of this logical extension.

In short, we need funding for the most basic operations: staffing, exhibits, conservation of collections, and modernization of facilities. Our membership has struggled valiantly to sustain an operating budget which at best is doing about two-thirds of the job. Our State, though sympathetic, can only be counted upon for small increments of additional aid. Faced with a staggering loss of its largest single employer, the U.S. Navy, we shall have tough going for the next few years.

Yet it is these very next years when the museums of our State particularly the historic sites and restorations could use the most help. The tourist projection for the New England region during the Bicentennial estimates upwards of twenty-five million visitors. Our Rhode Island Development Council has calculated that historical attractions and exhibits account for nearly twenty percent of our tourist dollar. Last year this meant a five million dollar contribution to the Newport economy alone, and approximately eighteen million dollars throughout the State. The prospects are, however, that without a substantial injection of public funds beyond the existing program of the National Endowments and the National Park Service Restoration grants, many of our sites will be unprepared and others simply overwhelmed. Most of our historic house museums and sites lack the funds to apply for matching grants; those who do apply must scramble for a fraction of their total requests.

A final point in favor of a Museum Services Act which would support basic museum operating expenses is one which I feel has received scant attention. To be sure, a chief element of the quiet crisis vexing our museums is the decay and deterioration of important collections in their care. But of even greater concern is the destruction and dispersal of records and objects not yet collected. By no means is the great bulk of aesthetic and historical public patrimony already housed in this country's museums and historical societies. In addition, with the possible exception of our largest museums, much of what has been "gathered" has been more the result of whimsical forces washing objects up to our curator's awareness than the result of systematic and aggressive thematic collecting. The inability of our organizations to mount thorough searches for important new objects and treasures stems directly from our struggles merely to survive. And the destruction of potential collections proceeds at an alarming pace. If we wait until we have won our wars on poverty, disease, crime, pollution, urban decay and the shortage of energy to rescue the remnants of our cultural heritage, we may discover that the only enterprise left to us will be archaeology.